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ABSTRACT

Rhetoric, the persuasive use of language to influence public thought and action, is experienced in advertising, and advertising can be used as a medium for teaching rhetoric. Advertising demonstrates both admirable and creative use of English and despicable corruption of both language and thought. Both aspects can be employed in teaching composition. In one course that used advertising as a basis for teaching composition, students were assigned six papers on advertising topics during a semester. The six topics were: explain why an ad is effective; discuss a poor ad; compare or contrast two ads on any basis; write a public service ad and explain why it is effective; argue that advertising is one of society's evils, that it ought to be controlled by the government, or that it benefits the consumer; and write on a controversial thesis regarding some aspect of advertising in the United States. Students learned about variety in diction, connotations, sentence structure, openings, use of detail, economy of expression, the sound of language, and persuasion through indirection. (TJ)

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ADVERTISING AND STUDENT RHETORIC

From Thomas Jefferson's statement that "advertisements contain the only truths to be relied on in a newspaper," to Virginia Slims' carcinogenic concept of women's liberation, we have indeed come a long way. Since Marx said something about the bourgeosie's transforming human values into commodities, the plenipotent industry that pushes merchandise, valuable or not -- presidential candidates, dogfoods, or education -- in the "market place of ideas", has made us all aware of its presence. And our students are equally aware. Rhetoric, the persuasive use of language to influence public thought and action, is experienced primarily, in our times, in advertising. As it is more the rhetoric of Protagoras than of Plato, it is perhaps little wonder that the buttons, distributed at a 4C's meeting a few years ago, reading "Support Your Local Rhetorician", produced a quite limited surge.

But, while we are but wet Canutes if we attempt "to stay by our commandment" advertising's effect upon our students, we need neither unilaterally bemoan nor endorse that influence. Such disjunction, however, has characterized many reactions. Some years ago, when the Winston campaigners flung down the gauntlet, our first reaction may have been to say, like Shakespeare's Bolingbroke, "Ere my tongue shall wound my honour with such feeble wrong, or sound so base a parle, I'll

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fight", but, apparently growing weary of explaining that good grammar or good taste was a false dilemna, some of the profession has switched, embracing advertising as a model of effective communication.

See, for example, in recent issues of College English, Patrick Brantlingor's analysis of the prc-business orientatior of a number of recent textbooks, and David Lazare's discussion of the advertising-as-an-art form bias of the widely adopted text, McQuade and Atwan, Popular Writing in America. In the same piece, Lazare goes on to quote Michael T. Marsden, in the Arizona English Bulletin. Perhaps recalling Aldous Huxley's "It is easier to write ten possibly effective sonnets than one effective advertisement," Marsden writes: "The television commercial. . . I have christened the sonnet form of the twentieth century. . . a highly rigourous structure within which there is immense freedom for the creative mind. . . what better examples of good description are there than television commercials?"

But if for some Madison Avenue summons up thoughts of the Mermaid Tavern, for others it may be associated with Berchtesgarten. Pointing out that "Hitler was the first European politician who saw the significance of the techniques of commercial advertising for politics," (the Fuerher describing, in Mein Kampf, his political method as Reklame -- puffed up advertising), a book of a few years back states that "Advertising in its spirit and purpose is germinal facism." While few pedagogues attack advertising in quite such terms, influenced, one might assume, by Orwell, a number in the profession have related the evils of moribund capitalism and the language, especially the language of advertising, which is fostered by that system. Some of you will recall,

for example, William Lutz'a trenchant article, in College English, entitled "The American Economic System: The Gospel According to the Advertising Council," or Stewart Justice's connection between mass communication, including advertising, and major errors in student writing -- false logic, redundancy, the giving over to cliché.

Faced then, with apparently diametrically opposed views regarding advertising and its implications for teaching, how do we proceed? I am not going to say that, between the ads-as-creative-sonnets, or ads-as-incipient-facism views, lies the truth. Rather, I think both positions have validity. Advertising does simultaneouly, sometimes even within one individual ad, demonstrate admirable and creative use of English, and despicable corruption of both language and thought. I would like to suggest that, as teachers, we can use both advertising's sins and virtues, through the rather obvious means of employing the former as examples of what to shun, and the latter as models of what might be sought. I'm sure that by this time, after two days of this meeting, we have all benefited by a number of "let me tell you what really worked for me" presentations. These provide numerous good ideas, but teaching being the indivdual art that it is, and classes differing, too often techniques are not transferable from one classroom to another. So I want to indicate how I have used advertising in Freshman Composition, with a certain degree of success, not just to suggest a possible model, but also to provide the basis for some hasty and impressionistic generalizations regarding the effect, good and bad, of advertising upon student's concepts of rhetoric (not to mention the other two-thirds of the trivium) and to draw a few conclusions about pedagogical implications.

What I am trying to sell is the idea of our using advertising, doing so inductively, and continuing to share, at our meetings and in our journals, in a discussion of our experiences with this use. Given the impact of advertising upon our students, we must, I think, take it into account in our syllabi. I'll take off my glasses now, ála a drug commercial, so that you know I'm serious: It's your choice: use it or suffer.

It was not, however, any principled position that led to my using advertising in Freshman Comp; rather, it was a casually concerned and relatively successful single assignment, that gave me the idea for a whole term's sequence of work. I asked students to clip out an ad and turn it in with a paper explaining why they found the ad to be either effective or ineffective. Good work was generally produced; many of the students were particularly perceptive on the visual aspects of the ad, noticing things that had escaped me. A few students, however, had difficulty in separating an evaluation of the ad from an evaluation of the product, writing, in effect,"This is a good ad because Zingers really are yummy"-- or vice versa. This problem -- confusing the ad and the product -- is one that you may continually encounter if you work with advertising, but it is a pedagogical useful problem. Unless students are made able to distinguish form and content, it is difficult to teach rhetoric as any kind of discipline, if only because they will feel that we grade their papers on the basis of whether we agree with their thesis. For the minority of students who have this problem, I think ads are especially useful in showing them that it is possible to judge the way something is presented, whatever we think of

the commodity or the thesis. It took a few individual conferences, but all (except one young woman, who subsequently dropped the course) came to understand this. On the other hand, as form and content are, of course, related, it was worthwhile to realize that some ads have an easier time than others, for some commodities, as some concepts, are more appealing than others. The appeal, naturally, varies with the audience, and it was natural to consider what segment of the consuming public each ad aimed at, and to move from this to a more general discussion of the importance, in all communication, of the rhetorical situation.

After using this assignment a few times, I decided to try arranging a whole course around advertising. This was a one quarter course, the first of two required terms in Freshman Composition. The first and last of 8 required papers were written on topics departmentally selected. Additionally, the students had to pass a departmental final essay, requiring arguementation on a topic selected from a list of controversial general issues. Thus, I had to set topics for six papers (approximately one a week) arranged so as to prepare the student for an arguementative final paper. I should add that the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, where I work, is a large urban commutor school, and that I was dealing with a wide range of students, the majority of them being from working class backgrounds. A modified "tracking" system is used in Freshman Composition at Circle, but although I taught high, low, and average sections, I found little difference in the students' reaction to advertising, beyond what seemed a slight tendancy for the less well

prepared students to be more inclined to praise, and the better students to attack, ads, and a slightly greater appreciation of visual, as opposed to verbal, aspects of advertising, in the "low-track" students.

For a text, I used McQuade and Atwan Popular Writing In America ; it would not have been my first choice, but it was on the list of "approved" books, and it does reproduce an interesting array of advertisements, including older ones of historical interest, and includes readings about advertising. Having found, through class discussion of some of the ads in the text, that, rather to my surprise, students generally found it easier to praise ads than to attack them, I asked them first to write a paper explaining why they found one of the ads in the text particularly effective. I gave them a formula and a sample thesis for this assignment. Ads were, I found, especially praised for their attention-getting devices and for their humor. The next paper asked them to discuss what they thought to be a poor ad -- at this point I expanded their options to include TV Commercials. Again I produced a formula: Although 1 is attempting to 2, it fails to be persuasive because of 3, 4, and 5 , and a sample thesis; One was: Although the Folger Mrs. Olsen coffee commercial is memorable and attempts to appeal to the audience's feelings about reliable housewives, and its desire for good flavor, it fails to be persuasive because it doesn't support the idea of "mountain-grown" being good; it provides no real evidence about the product, and it makes Mrs. Olsen an unrealistic busybody.

These papers generally were well done; it was interesting to find that some of the ads selected on the first assignment as good, were picked by other students, for this assignment, as bad. Obviously, there was a basis for class discussion here, and for a consideration of underlying assumptions and the use of details to support a generalization.

The third of the six assignments asked for a comparison/contrast of two advertisements or commercials, on any basis that the student chose. Most of them compared either different approaches to advertising the same product, such as two different cigarette ads, or the same types of appeal, such as snobbery, for different products. The slanting of material to specific audiences came up here, and many of the students were particularly perceptive in seeing how ads were pitched at different age groups, and there were also interesting discussions regarding black-oriented ads, the students disagreeing regarding whether some such individual ads were effective or not, their disagreements not following racial lines.

I should mention that, all along, the class was dealing also with more conventional composition materials, yet it was easy to make connections between discussing sentence structure, diction, paragraphing, etc., and discussing ads and commercials. By this point, the sections had inductively worked out some standards by which to judge persuasive communication, and I found it valuable to be able to say, for example, "You have criticized this ad for not giving the facts to back up its claims, yet you have failed here to support your generalization" or "You praise this ad for the way it quickly

grasps the audience's attention - I'm glad to see you using a similar grabber in your first paragraph."

The fourth of the six assignments asked the students to apply the standards they had developed. They were to describe how the would write a public-service ad or commercial and why they thought their ad would be effective. This proved to be a difficult assignment for some, who either had trouble in recognizing what a public service ad was, or in summoning up any creative imagination. On the other hand, some of their efforts were quite inventive. Sharing these better ones, and revision subsequently helped most to do at least an adequate job.

By the time of the next assigmment, I felt that the students had examined and discussed ads, and some background readings, to the point that they were able to attempt to generalize, not only about the techniques of advertising, but about advertising as an institution. I asked them to select one of the following statements and argue either for or against it: Advertising is one of society's significant evils," or "Advertising ought to be more strongly regulated by the government," or "Advertising benefits the consumer". The last was the most popular, and the pro and con students were split fairly evenly. The resulting class discussions were thus both lively, and being able to be based on particular examples, not so much the mere bullsessions that too often seem the major alternative to dull class meetings. By this point in the tern, some students were bored with the whole idea of advertising, and even complaining that they were being forced to watch the boob tube to help do their English work, when they would rather be doing some serious reading. Well, you can't please everyone, and these students tended to be the type that, in an introductory literature course, come

up to tell you that they have always loved poetry, particularly Rod McCuen, but I was able to convince the really "serious", non-popular-culture-oriented ones that studying something doesn't necessarily imply endorsing it, and it was worth understanding what they may think of as pablum for the hoi-palloi. The majority of the students, however, seemed quite gratified by being given a kind of intellectual imprimatur to concern themselves with what was an important part of their ordinary experience,and they took to showing me ads that they found especially stupid or clever.

Finally, I asked them to write on "a controversial thesis (of their own choice) regarding some aspect of advertising in America." I had to help some of them, in conference, to pin down this assignment, but it worked out well, overall, and did help set them up for passing the departmental exam.

So, overall, I was pleased with the results of this sort of a course, but as I indicated earlier, the point is not just to boast, but rather to draw some conclusions. I think the overall effect of advertising upon students' concepts of rhetoric may be less deleterious than some of us, including me, may have thought. In no particular order, let me list the generalizations, probably not very startling, yet worth making explicit, about students' rhetoric, conditioned by advertising, that I found true for my students and that I suspect are also true for the majority of freshman students throughtout the country.

They have a particular concern for openings and "grabbers". They believe one picture equals a thousand words. They are ambivalent about "cleverness" in word usage -- they can admire it, but they distrust it.

They are conditioned to employ excessive ~~repition~~ repetition, but they don't really like it. They often resent stereotyping, such as of housewives in detergent commercials. They frequently miss the absence of supporting detail. They appreciate off-beat and self-depreciating humor. They accept, and use, sentence fragments. They turn off from direct confrontation -- the Pepsi vs Coke battle offended many students, as did most explicit attacks on competitor's products. They are often able to see through, but don't worry much about, logical fallacies, correctly recognizing that ads can be illogical and yet effective. They are sensitive to, but not always very consciously aware of, verbal and visual connotations. They are alert to, and fairly conscious of, the impact of sound and rhythm in language. And, finally, they value economy in expression.

If there is some truth to these generalizations, what are the implications for our pedagogy? I proceed from the assumption that we should start from where we find our students, and move from there. One conclusion that suggests itself, and one which my previous approaches and inclinations causes me to resist, is that it may be desireable to move from style to organization -- I have been used to going the other way. I think we should put an early emphasis upon variety, in diction, through understanding connotation, and in sentence structure, because students recognize the real problem of easily boring an audience. We might also want to pay particular attention to the openings of papers, for students are quite concerned about gaining attention before the reader "changes the channel". Use of detail should also be emphasized, for the vagueness of many ads offends students (and here we have to draw

parallels between visual and verbal detail). Economy of expression is also something they are pre-conditioned to appreciate and learn about early in a course. Sensitive to the sound of language, students will benefit from more reading aloud of their papers, in class, than is often done. Finally, I think we need not hesitate to introduce, early on, persuasion through indirection -- irony, litotes etc., and perhaps "A Modest Proposal" -- for students are more sophisticated in this area than we might have realized.

On the other hand, we might do well to postpone teaching traditional argumentation including refutation and rebuttal, until later in the course, for students seem to feel there is some sort of bad taste involved in directly attacking an opponent or his position. When we do take up logic, the best lead-in is probably through consideration of stereotyping and hasty generalization.

Whether you accept my tentative suggestions is of secondary importance. What I think is more important is that many of you do come to employ advertising as subject matter in good composition classes, and that you draw your own generalizations and conclusions, which we can then share. If you choose to do so, I think I can guarantee you that most students will be interested in the course, and I can also guarantee that you will be able to teach more inductively, and less prescriptively. Clearly, if a student discovers for himself or herself a principle of rhetoric, that principle is more vital than one imposed by the authority of the text or the lecture. But enough "guarantees" -- I remember Dr. Johnson's statement that "Promise ... large promise is the soul of an advertisement," and will advertise my position no further. Just write

to "Teaching" @Stone, Box 4348, Chicago 60680 -- that's "Teaching" Box 4348. Do it today -- the time is limited.